

Does Middleton offer post-Miller life for So. Md.?

Senator seen as possible successor

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ANNAPOLIS — In his 12-year legislative career, Thomas "Mac" Middleton has scaled the ranks of the Maryland Senate to become one of its most influential members.

Just one more rung stands between him and the summit, which, in legislative parlance, is the Senate presidency.

Longtime Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. has backed off his statement last November that this term — his 10th in Annapolis — would be his last as presiding officer.

Potential successors, including Middleton (D-Charles), are reticent to discuss the possible vacancy until Miller (D-Calvert, Prince George's) makes a final decision. The Waldorf farmer has publicly said he hopes Miller keeps the presidency as long as Middleton is in office, a refrain he repeated at his annual fundraiser Saturday.

"I hope he does stay on. I think he is a very, very good president of the Senate," Middleton said Tuesday. "... If there's anything I can do that would encourage him to stay on, I'm there."

The two men are close allies, but Miller has declined to discuss his political future or anoint a successor, saying there are several good candidates.

Still, the kinship between the two Southern Marylanders is evident.

"He's never let me down," Miller said of Middleton. "In whatever capacity he serves, he

will always excel."

Even when the men don't see eye to eye — most notably on slots, where Miller is a leading proponent and Middleton is a fierce critic — there remains a profound respect for each other.

"I think he's recognized all around the state as a great leader who has a vision not just

for Southern Maryland, but for the entire state," Miller said of Middleton.

Such statements lead some to believe

that Middleton is Miller's preferred heir to the presidency.

"If he were to retire, then I would think that Mac would be a very, very strong candidate," said Chris Reynolds, chairman of the Calvert County Democratic Central Committee.

Of the likely contenders to replace Miller — Budget & Taxation Chairman Ulysses Currie (D-Prince George's) and Judicial Proceedings Chairman Brian E. Frosh (D-Montgomery) are the others — Middleton would offer the most seamless transition. He and Miller are generally regarded as conservative-to-moderate Democrats, while Frosh and Currie are seen as more liberal.

"I think that I probably would be the next best person to maintain that balanced approach to legislation that would come through the Maryland Senate next to President Miller," Middleton said.

Cash dash

A proficient fundraiser, Middleton amassed upwards of \$60,000 in the last week alone. Some of the state's political heavyweights, including Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler, joined hundreds of constituents Saturday at Middleton's 300-acre farm for the annual fall picnic. At \$25 a head — \$10 for seniors — it's Charles County's most well-attended political event of the year.

Last week, a group of health insurance brokers hosted a fundraiser for the Senate finance chairman in Annapolis that raised about \$20,000.

The ability to raise money is integral to presidential hopefuls.

"You've got to be able to demonstrate to your Senate leadership that when you get into those tough races where [Democratic] candidates don't have enough money to ward off a Republican surge, that there will be money for them," Middleton said.

A voice for So. Maryland

Southern Maryland has a lot at stake in Miller's decision to stay or go. If he leaves, the region loses its most powerful kingmaker in Annapolis.

Middleton offers the best chance to maintain the sway that has yielded additional money for school construction and electricity deregulation grants under Miller.

"Too often the big guys from Prince George's County, Montgomery County and Baltimore have the political clout that we can't quite muster," Reynolds said. "To enjoy that kind of political representation is pretty special."

Former House speaker John Hanson Briscoe said the region already benefits from Middleton's high rank. As Senate president, Southern Maryland would remain at the table.

"I see him being a strong leader being able to work with any executive or Cabinet leader in a forceful but responsible way," said Briscoe, who led the House from 1973 to 1978.

Senate presidents wield tremendous power in appointing committee leaders, setting a legislative agenda and disbursing state aid. That makes it an office lawmakers from every region lust after.

"A president of the Senate who has roots in Southern Maryland becomes very important for ensuring our needs are met in Charles County and Southern Maryland," Middleton said.

The region's legislative muscle comforted some in the region when Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) did not name a Southern Marylander to his Cabinet, said Cindy Slattery, president of the St. Mary's County Democratic Club.

"It's really important to have that voice," she said. "It would be a huge loss if there was not a Southern Maryland person at that level."

As one of four standing committee chairmen, Middleton said that Southern Maryland gets its piece of the pie. "I've got as good access as affecting change and legislation right now where I am," he said. "... I probably couldn't get any more for my district if I were Senate president."

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